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WRITING MATERIALS IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

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From the second half of the nineteenth century thousands of South Arabian and other early Arabian inscriptions have been found all over Arabia, most of them written on stone, but some on bronze or other materials. The widespread use of stone for writing is characteristic of pre-Islamic inscriptions and gives the impression that the South and the North Arabs wrote only on these materials: however, the discovery of wood-sticks in the Yemen in recent years has focused our attention not only on the script in which they were written, but also on the materials upon which they are inscribed. This discovery has made it necessary to investigate the writing materials in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Archaeological and epigraphical discoveries have provided us with good information about the writing materials which were used by the North and the South Arabs. This supplements references to the same subject in Arab authors, in books of *ḥadīth*,[1] in the Qur'ān,[2] in commentaries on the Qur'ān and in the South Arabian inscriptions. In these sources many terms are attested for these materials which were used by the Arabs before Islam. This paper will analyse this data, give a general view of the relation of writing to the writing materials and discuss some North and South Arabic terms referring to written materials.

[1] This article is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the Seminar for Arabian Studies in London 1993. I wish to express my thanks to Professor W. W. Müller for reading the draft of this article. See: A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane: Les Six Livres, le musnad d'al-Dārimī, le Muwaṭṭa' de Mālik, le musnad de Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Leiden 1936–88); A. I. Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam (gest. 218/834)* (Heidelberg 1970).

[2] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 2 vols., ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo 1974), I, 202–11; N. Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Ḳur'ānic Development, with a Full Description of the Ḳur'ānic Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 50, Chicago 1939), 51–4; A. Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* (I. Teil, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Denkschriften, 94, Band I. Abhandlung, Vienna 1967), 66–117; E. Haeupt-

I The Materials Used for Writing

Skin

Two kinds of writing materials, prepared from skins of goats, cows and gazelles, are attested. These are leather and parchment; while leather was tanned, parchment was not.

1 Parchment

Parchment (*raqq*, *waraq*) can be defined as treated skin of certain animals, produced by specific methods. In particular, parchment was made from the hide of goat, lamb, sheep, gazelle and asses. The word *raqq*[3] is defined by Arab authors as a thin fine leather. Moreover, some of these authors describe this material as a 'white document' (*al-ṣaḥīfah al-bayḍā'*).[4] Parchment (*raqq*) however, is untanned skin, whereas red leather (*al-adīm*) and white leather (*al-qaḍīm*) are tanned skins. This is a basic difference between leather and parchment.[5] The word *raqq* derives from the common Semitic root *rqq*, 'be soft, be thin'.[6]

Parchment is mentioned in the Qur'ān,[7] in *ḥadīth* and by several Arab authors. Moreover, it is mentioned several times in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.[8] Gazelle skin (*raqq ghazāl*) was considered to be one of the best kinds of parchment and is referred to in the sources as writing material for the Qur'ān and for other documents in early Islamic times.[9] A Qur'ān fragment written on ostrich hide has been

ner, 'Koranische Hinweise auf die materielle Kultur der alten Araber' (Ph.D. diss., Tübingen 1966), 97–101.

[3] S. Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen* (Leiden 1886), 246.

[4] Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs*, 10 vols (Cairo n. d.), article *rqq*; A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Gaekwad's Oriental Series 79, Baroda 1938), 143, considered the possibility that the word *raqq* is of Ethiopian origin.

[5] On the manufacturing of parchment and leather, see R. T. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* V (Leiden 1957), 36–52 and M. L. Ryder, 'The Biology and History of Parchment', in P. Rück (ed.), *Pergament: Geschichte, Struktur, Restaurierung, Herstellung* (Sigmaringen 1991), 25–33.

[6] W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden 1991²), 473.

[7] Qur'ān 52: 2–3; Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 143.

[8] N. al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah fī dawāwīn shuʿarā' al-muʿallaqāt al-ʿashr* (Beirut 1991), 117; Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī wa-qīmatihā al-tārīkhiyyah* (Cairo 1978⁵), 77.

[9] Abū al-Rīḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb mā li-l-Hind min*

found.[10] *Al-raqq al-qashīb*, 'white or new parchment', is mentioned by the poet Ḥassān Ibn Thābit.[11]

In English the word 'parchment' derives from the name of the city of Pergamum in Asia Minor, which was famous for this product.[12] Parchment had been used in Egypt as early as the Old Kingdom, and in the first millennium BC apparently spread all over the Near East.[13] In Mesopotamia, parchment-scribes are represented in Assyrian art, side by side with papyrus-scribes and cuneiform-scribes.[14] Parchment was a suitable material for the Phoenician, Hebrew and the Aramaic alphabetical scripts.[15] In the Persian and Hellenistic periods parchment was the most widespread writing material for correspondence all over the Near East. This has been confirmed not only by classical authors like Diodorus,[16] but also by archaeological excavation and by epigraphical discoveries. According to Herodotus, the Ionian Greeks used to write on hides of goats and sheep before papyrus was used.[17] The letters of the Persian official Aršam, which have been found in Egypt, and which were sent from South Mesopotamia or Persia, are written on parchment.[18] Arabic sources record that Persians also used tanned leathers for their

maqūlah maqbūlah fī al-ʿaql aw mardhūlah (Hyderabad 1958), 133; Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan Ibn Durayd, *Kitāb al-Ishtiqāq*, ed. ʿA. M. Hārūn (Baghdad 1979), 377; H.-C Graf von Bothmer, 'Meisterwerke islamischer Buchkunst: Koranische Kalligraphie und Illumination im Handschriftenfund aus der Großen Moschee in Sanna', in *Jemen. 3000 Jahre Kunst und Kulture des glücklichen Arabien*, ed. W. Daum (Frankfurt a.M. 1987), 177–80; cf. also U. Dreibholz, 'Der Fund von Sanna', in P. Rück, *Pergament*, 299–313.

[10] O. Spies, 'Die Bibliotheken des Hidschas', *ZDMG* 90 (1936), 102.

[11] *Dīwān of Ḥassān Ibn Thābit*, 2 vols., ed. Walid N. ʿArafat (E. J. W. Gibb Memorial New Series 25, London 1971), I, p. 82, 10/1.

[12] R. R. Johnson, 'The Role of Parchment in Greco-Roman Antiquity' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles 1968), 22–52.

[13] G. van der Kooij, 'Early North-West Semitic Script Traditions: An Archaeological Study of the linear Alphabetic Scripts up to c. 500 B.C. Ink and Argillary' (Leiden, diss., 1986), 77–88.

[14] R. P. Dougherty, 'Writing upon Parchment and Papyrus among the Babylonian and the Assyrians', *JAOS* 48 (1928), 109–35.

[15] K. Galling, 'Tafel, Buch and Blatt', in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. H. Goedicke (London 1971), 207–23.

[16] Diodorus Siculus, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Loeb Classical Library, London 1935), Book 2, 32/4.

[17] Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley (Loeb Classical Library, London 1921), Book 5, 58.

[18] G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford 1954, reprint Osnabrück 1968), 1–3.

writings.[19] The texts discovered at Dura Europos[20] and at Qumran[21] are mainly written on parchment. Throughout the classical world parchment was a very important and common writing material.[22] We do not know when it was first used in Arabia but it seems to have been well known among the Arabs before Islam and it continued in use in the Islamic period.[23] Apparently parchment was manufactured in Arabia; thus it must have been cheaper than papyrus. Arabic sources mention that the Yemen and the Ḥijāz were famous centres of parchment production.

2 Leather

The literary evidence for the use of leather in pre-Islamic Arabia is abundant. However, there were different kinds of leather which were used for writing — red leather, white leather and other types. According to Arabic sources it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction between them. The production of the different kinds of leather, for example, white and red, is dependent on the methods of tanning and preparation. Vegetable tanning produces a leather varying from pale cream to dark reddish-brown.[24] Arabic sources give us little information about the making and preparing of leather in the pre-Islamic period, but we have good information about this in the Islamic era. Nevertheless, these sources have informed us that Arabs used more than ten different kinds of trees for tanning, for example, *al-qarẓ*, which was employed especially in the Yemen, and *al-ṣirf*, which was used for tanning *al-adīm* and which gives it its red colour.[25]

It is difficult to trace the origin and evolution of the use of leather in Arabia, although it was common in the ancient Near East from the earliest periods. We do not have information about the use of parchment or leather in the South Arabian inscriptions. The climate is favourable for the survival of leather over a long period of time.

[19] Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, 14 vols, ed. Wizārat al-thaqāfah wā-al-irshād al-qawmī (Cairo 1920, reprint, Cairo, n.d.), II, 486; Muḥammad b. Isḥāq al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 2 vols, ed. G. Flügel (Leipzig 1871–2), 21.

[20] Johnson, *The Role of Parchment in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 12–19.

[21] A. Lemaire, 'Vom Ostrakon zur Schriftrolle', *ZDMG* Supplement VI, XXII *Deutscher Orientalistentag* (Wiesbaden 1985), 110–23.

[22] Johnson, *The Role of Parchment in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 52–88.

[23] Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 108–11.

[24] Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, 36–52.

[25] ʿAlī b. Ismāʿīl Ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ fī al-lughah*, 17 vols (Būlāq 1316–21 AH), IV, 105–11.

The discovery of leather coffins at Shibām al-Ghirās[26] shows that leather was produced in the Yemen. Moreover, leather coffins are reported to have been used by the people of Thamud.[27] Houses[28] and sanctuaries were built from the material; for example, the *kaʿbah* of Najrān was a dome made of three hundred pieces of leather (*qubbah min adam min thalāth miʾat jild*).[29] In addition, leather was used for other purposes, such as making wine- and water-vessels. Thus leather was widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia.

A common and simple kind of leather was possibly what is referred to as *jild*. This is mentioned in the sources as a writing material. The prophet Muḥammad is said to have sent a letter written on *jild* to the tribe of Banū Ḥārithah b. ʿAmr b. Qurayẓ.[30] They took it, washed it and patched their leather bucket with it. It was a custom in North Arabia to write on sandals if other writing material was not available.[31]

(a) Red leather (*adīm,* pl. *adam*): for *adīm* the Arabic lexicons give the meaning 'red leather', and describe it as a tanned leather. Ibn Sīdah wrote that *al-adīm* was tanned with a red material called *al-ṣarf*.[32] *Al-adīm* was a precious material and was used for writing the Qurʾān.[33] We have information from Arabic sources that when the written texts of the Qurʾān were gathered, some were on *al-adīm*.[34] *Al-adīm* was used also for correspondence, agreements and contracts. Red leather (*adīm aḥmar*) was employed by the prophet Muḥammad in his correspondence.[35] It is referred to several times in pre-Islamic poetry, for example by al-Muraqqish the elder.[36] In addition, *al-adīm*

[26] Y. ʿAbdallāh, *Awrāq fī tārīkh al-Yaman wa-āthāri-hi* (Beirut 1990²), 173–81.

[27] Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wā-al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 10 vols (Cairo, 1960), I, 230.

[28] Qurʾān 16: 82.

[29] Yāqūt b. ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, 6 vols (Leipzig 1866, reprint Tehran 1965), IV, 756; for other examples see H. Lammens, *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'hégire* (Beirut 1928), 128–36. P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford 1987), 98–101.

[30] J. ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-ʿarab qabla al-Islām*, 10 vols (Beirut 1980), VIII, 303.

[31] Ibid., 272–3.

[32] Ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* IV, 105–11.

[33] al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 207.

[34] Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 30 vols (Cairo 1305/1905), I, 20.

[35] Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* I, 38; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 486.

[36] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 24 vols (Cairo, 1927–74), VI, 127.

was used for writing treaties, agreements and promissory notes. According to the sources this kind of leather was popular in Mecca. *Al-adīm* was certainly produced locally in Arabia, especially in the Yemen; *al-adīm al-khawlānī*, 'red leather from Khaulān' is mentioned in a *ḥadīth*.[37] In the library of the caliph al-Ma'mūn there was a promissory note written on *adīm* for ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of the prophet Muḥammad. The debtors lived in the districts around Ṣanʿāʾ (*ʿuzal Ṣanʿāʾ*).[38] If this story is correct, it is an indication that *al-adīm* was used for writing in this period.

(b) White leather (*qaḍīm*; pl. *quḍum*): the Arabic lexicons define this word as 'white leather' to write on,[39] or a 'white leaf'; moreover, *qaḍīmah* means a 'white document'. The sources maintain that *qaḍīm* could be any kind of leather for writing. It is said to be one of the writing materials of the Qur'ān.[40] It occurs also in pre-Islamic poetry.[41]

Plants/Wood

Both North and South Arabs used the palm tree, *ʿarʿar* (juniper), *ʿilb* (*Zizyphus spina christi*[42]) and *al-bān* (ben-tree) as writing material. The sources mention that they also employed leaves and wood.

ʿasīb (pl. *ʿusub*): the Arabs wrote on palm leaf stalks (*ʿusub al-nakhl*). The word *ʿasīb* is interpreted in the Arabic lexicons as a palm branch stripped of its leaves, or one from which the leaves have been removed. It is also the part of a palm-branch upon which leaves have not grown.[43] It seems that *ʿasīb* was used for writing in two different ways: the first way was to engrave the text on it with a sharp instrument like a knife, and in this case the palm-branch had to be fresh, i.e. suitable for engraving. The second way was to write on it with pen and ink, just like writing on papyrus, in which case the palm-branch had to be dry.

[37] Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* I, 38.

[38] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 5; al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 77.

[39] Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Fīrūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (Beirut 1986), art. *qḍm*.

[40] E. W. Lane, *An Arabic–English Lexicon*, 8 vols (London 1863–97), 2041; al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 80.

[41] al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 255.

[42] al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter in den Werken von al-Hamdānī und Našwān und ihre Parallelen in den semitischen Sprachen* (Marburger Studien zur Afrika- und Asienkunde, Serie B: Asien Bd. 10, Berlin 1987), 160.

[43] al-Fīrūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, article *ʿsb*; Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2041; al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *ʿsb*.

We know from pre-Islamic poetry that *ʿasīb* was used for writing when it was fresh, since this is recorded by Labīd and by Ibn Durayd, who says that books of Ḥimyar were written on a fresh palm-leaf stalk (*ʿasīb dhābil*).[45] This method of writing seems to have been popular in the Yemen and the Ḥijāz. *ʿAsīb* as a writing material is mentioned in the *ḥadīth*[46] and was used for writing the Qur'ān.[47] Furthermore, it is important that this word occurs in the diwans of the pre-Islamic Arabic poets, such as Imru' al-Qays[48] and Labīd.[49]

The newly discovered inscribed wood-sticks in the Yemen are to be classified as *ʿusub*. Apparently *ʿasīb* was the material used for everyday purposes such as for correspondence and agreements. The material is suitable for this purpose and it was easy for people to carry it with them. The wood-sticks discovered contain information about everyday life, and thus are different in content from monumental inscriptions. Furthermore, the prophet Muḥammad also used this material in his correspondence. It is mentioned that his letter to the Banū ʿUdhrah was written on *ʿusub*.[50]

saʿaf (sg. *saʿfah*): Arabic lexicons give the meaning for this word as leaves of the palm-branch or the palm-branch itself, mainly used when dry.[51] They were employed especially for writing the Qur'ān.

jarīdah (pl. *jarīd, jarā'id*): this has the same meaning, 'palm leaves', as *saʿaf*. Ibn Sīdah states that *saʿaf* means *jarīd* in the Ḥijāz.[52] Al-Hamdānī mentions *jarīdah* as writing material in the Yemen.[53] The use of *jarā'id* for writing the Qur'ān is attested in a *ḥadīth*. There is no evidence that palm leaves were employed for writing in the ancient Near East. However, inscriptions recorded on palm leaves were found in India. The word *kharīṣ* (pl. *akhrāṣ, khurṣān*),[54] which has

44 Iḥsān ʿAbbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd b. Rabīʿa al-ʿĀmirī* (Kuwait 1962), 138/3.

45 Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Durayd, *Jamharat al-lughah*, 4 vols (Cairo 1970), I, 254.

46 Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, 15 vols (Beirut 1955–66), art. *qdm*.

47 al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *ʿsb*; al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 203, 205, 207.

48 *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays*, ed. Dār Ṣādir (Beirut, n.d.), 170.

49 ʿAbbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 138/3.

50 Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 93–4.

51 al-Fīrūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, art. *sʿf*; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, art. *sʿf*; al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *sʿf*.

52 Ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* XI, 106.

53 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* VIII, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Akwaʿ al-Ḥiwālī (Damascus 1979), 221.

54 al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *khrṣ*.

the same meaning as *jarīd*, is mentioned in Arabic sources as a writing material.[55] The modern Arabic word *jarīdah*, 'newspaper', comes from the word *jarīd*.

karānīf (sg. *kurnūfah*): this is defined as the palm trunk, or the stalk of the palm-leaf which remains on the trunk or leaf-stalk.[56] The use of *karānīf* as writing material is associated with the Qur'ān.[57]

karab (pl. *akrāb/kirāb*): defined by Arabic authors as stumps, lower ends of palm-branches which are thick and broad, it is also defined as small pieces of *karānīf*. *Karab* is recorded as a writing material for the Qur'ān.[58]

bān, 'ben-tree, Moringa': this is attested by the pre-Islamic poet Labīd as a writing material used in the Yemen, and it is mentioned together with *ʿasīb*. It could be that some of the newly discovered wood-sticks were made from this kind of tree, but this has yet to be verified. Labīd speaks of a young Yemeni, who writes in *zabūr*-script on *bān* and *ʿasīb* with a pen (*qalam*).[59] The *bān*-tree is mentioned together with the *ʿilb*-tree in Sabaean inscriptions.[60]

ʿilb (sg. *ʿilbah*, pl. *ʿulūb*), ' *ʿilb*-tree' or *Zizyphus spina christi*: archaeological discoveries from the Yemen have brought to light small objects of wood on which writing appears. These are amulets or pendants. It has been suggested that these objects were made from the *ʿilb*-tree.[61] *ʿilb* is a Yemeni word, explained by the Arabic *sidr*.[62] *Sidr* is mentioned in a *ḥadīth* as being used for writing.[63]

ʿarʿar, 'juniper': some Arabic sources mention this tree as being used as writing material. Apparently wooden tablets were made from *ʿarʿar*.[64]

[55] ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-ʿarab qabla al-Islām* VIII, 132.

[56] M. Ullmann, *Wörterbuch der Klassischen Arabischen Sprache* I (Wiesbaden 1970), 150–51.

[57] Ibid., 151; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* I, 21.

[58] al-Fīrūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, art. *krb*; Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2602.

[59] ʿAbbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 138.

[60] A. F. L. Beeston, M. A. Ghul, W. W. Müller and J. Ryckmans, *Sabaic Dictionary* (English–French–Arabic) (Louvain-la-Neuve–Beirut 1982), 33.

[61] Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 94.

[62] al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 160–61.

[63] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 484.

[64] According to al-Aṣmaʿī, Arabs used to write on *al-ʿasīb*, *al-bān* and *al-ʿarʿar*, cf. ʿAbbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 138.

Wood was used for writing in both North and South Arabia. It was prepared from the different kinds of trees discussed above. In addition, a kind of wood called *rawsam* was used for writing.[65] The use of wood for writing has been confirmed through archaeological and epigraphical discoveries, particularly the wood-sticks found in South Arabia. Arabic sources give us some information about this subject in North Arabia. Tablets (*alwāḥ*) of wood were employed as a writing material; the North Arabs also used camel saddles (*raḥl, ikāf*)[66] and small saddle boards called *aqtāb*,[67] (sg. *qatab*) for writing, as well as divining arrows (*sihām al-istiqsām; aqdāḥ*)[68] and walking sticks (sg. *ʿaṣā*). This practice is recorded for North Arabia, and by al-Hamdānī for South Arabia.[69] Arrows are mentioned in Arabic sources as being used for writing in the Yemen.[70]

Papyrus

Qirṭās (also *qurṭās*, pl. *qarāṭīs*) is defined as paper, a sheet of paper, or as parchment, papyrus or a document. Arabic sources do not give a specific meaning for it; it signifies sheets for writing, which could be of parchment or papyri. Papyrus was used not only as a sheet for writing, but also in the form of a scroll. Papyrus as a writing material was already used in Egypt in the third millennium BC.[71] From the beginning of the first millennium BC it was used for writing alphabetical scripts such as Aramaic, Phoenician and Hebrew. Aramaic papyri have been found in several places such as Wādī al-Dāliyah, in the Jordan valley, and in Egypt. Papyrus was used for writing Aramaic in Mesopotamia from the beginning of the ninth century BC.[72]

[65] al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *rsm*.

[66] al-Mufaḍḍal b. Muḥammad al-Ḍabbī, *Dīwān al-mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, ed. C. J. Lyall (Oxford 1921, reprint Baghdad 1965), 460.

[67] al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *qtb*; al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 207.

[68] Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawiyyah*, 4 vols, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. (Beirut, n.d.), I, 152.

[69] al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* VIII, 221.

[70] Zakariyyāʾ b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī, *Kitāb Āthār al-bilād wa-akhbār al-ʿibād*, 2 vols, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen 1848–9), I, 32.

[71] A. Schlott, *Schrift und Schreiber im Alten Ägypten* (Munich 1991), 62–85; M. A. Hussein, *Vom Papyrus zum Codex: Der Beitrag Ägyptens zur Buchkultur* (Leipzig 1970), 16–22.

[72] A. Lemaire, 'Writing and Writing Materials', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman, 6 vols (New York 1992), VI, 999–1008.

Aramaic scribes writing on papyrus are represented in Assyrian reliefs and frescos, but unfortunately written papyri have not yet been found in Mesopotamia. Later on, papyrus was an important material for writing throughout the entire classical world.[73] Many of the Dead Sea texts were written on papyri. Nabataean papyri were also found south-west of the Dead Sea. Palmyrene papyri from the first century AD have been discovered recently in a tomb in Palmyra.[74]

Qirṭās is a Greek word introduced into Arabic through Aramaic.[75] The Arabs used not only this word for paper, but other terms as well: *ṭirs*, *kāghid*, *kāghidh*, *kaghīd*; the word *qirṭās* is defined as *ṭawāmīr*. The meaning of the word *waraq* is not quite clear. It does not have the exact meaning of paper in this period; it is likely to have had the same meaning as *qirṭās*. In particular *waraq* at that time were sheets of parchment or papyrus.[76]

In pre-Islamic Arabia *qirṭās* seems to have been popular. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān,[77] and the Qu'rān is said to have been written on it.[78] It is also attested several times in poetry[79] and in the *ḥadīth*.[80] Later it continued to be used in the Islamic period until it was replaced by paper.[81] Apparently *qirṭās* was imported from Syria–Palestine and from Egypt, most likely through Gaza. The pre-Islamic poet Ṭarafa mentions *qirṭās shāmī*, 'Syrian papyrus'.[82]

Cloth

The Arabs used cloth as a writing material. This is evident from the *ḥadīth* and from pre-Islamic poetry. The terms employed are *mahāriq* (sg. *muhraq*), 'silk (for writing)', and *karābīs* (sg. *kirbās*), 'cotton-material'. *Kirbās* is defined as a coarse garment or a piece of cloth to

[73] H. Blanck, *Das Buch in der Antike* (Munich 1990, 56–62; H. Hunger, *Schreiben und Lesen in Byzanz* (Munich 1989), 17–23.

[74] These small pieces are exhibited in the Palmyra Museum.

[75] Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, 245.

[76] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 487–88; Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 66–93.

[77] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 235; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 485.

[78] al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān*, I, 207.

[79] al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 202.

[80] Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam*, 291.

[81] Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 98–105; Hussein, *Vom Papyrus zum Codex*, 91–6.

[82] al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 252.

write on.[83] Linen (cloth), *kattān*, was employed for writing in the ancient Near East, especially in Egypt, and continued in use for this purpose in late antiquity and in the Islamic period. The word is of Aramaic origin.[84] Arabic sources maintain that the Indians wrote on white silk.[85] *Muhraq* is explained as a white silk, polished with gum and used for writing.[86]

Muhraq was employed by the adviser of the Ḥimyarite king Qaṭan Māzin b. Azd, for writing a letter to the population of al-Shiḥr and Oman.[87] The Arabic tradition says that Arabs learned writing on this kind of material from Persia and Byzantium; the term *muhraq* is said by Classical Arabic authors to be of Persian origin.[88] This Persian word came into Arabic through Aramaic.

Ibn al-Nadīm mentions that silk (*ḥarīr*) was employed in India for writing.[89] It is well known that silk was used for writing in China in the second part of the first millennium BC. In the Islamic period *mahāriq* is attested as a writing material.

Arabic tradition maintains that the famous seven odes, the *muʿallaqāt*, were written on or embroidered on byssus and were hung in the Kaʿbah. Other Arabic traditions claim that these seven odes were called *mudhahhabāt* 'golden', because they were written in gold on Coptic cloth.[90] Copies of the Qurʾān were written with gold in the early Islamic period.[91]

Metal

Metal was used as a writing material in the ancient Near East from the earliest period. Writing on silver tablets is mentioned in pre-Islamic times and small inscribed silver objects were discovered in the Yemen. Written bronze tablets were found in several places in the Yemen. The bronze tablets of ʿAmrān are good examples. Such tab-

[83] Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam*, 319; Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 97, 105–6.

[84] Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam*, 318; Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, 42; al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 65.

[85] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 485–6.

[86] Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 105.

[87] Ibid., 105.

[88] al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 80–81.

[89] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 21.

[90] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Muzhir fī ʿulūm al-lughah wa-anwāʿi-hā*, 2 vols, ed. Jād al-Mawlā al-Bajāwī and Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, n.d.), II, 480.

[91] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 477.

lets have also been found in Qaryat al-Faw. It seems that this method of writing was popular in South Arabia and the technology of bronze tablets was well developed in ancient Yemen.[92] The tablet of gold (*lawḥ min dhahab*), which is mentioned by al-Hamdānī[93] and others,[94] was apparently a tablet made not of gold but of bronze, and may be of the same type as the bronze tablets which have been discovered. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that the Southern Arabs wrote on gold, as texts engraved on gold have been discovered in the ancient Near East, such as the engraved amulet found in the cemetery of Timnaʿ.[95] Coins have also been found in numerous places in Arabia. Moreover, bronze vessels with inscriptions have been unearthed in excavations in Arabia, and inscribed bronze weights and other objects have been discovered at Qaryat al-Faw.[96]

Bones

The Arabs used different kinds of bones for writing material. Ibn al-Nadīm and others mention that Arabs used to write on the shoulder blades of camels (*aktāf ibil*) and of sheep. They also wrote on ribs (*aḍlāʿ*, sg. *ḍilʿ*),[97] and shoulder blades are also recorded in a *ḥadīth* as being used for writing.[98] Camel bones with inscriptions in red were found in Qaryat al-Faw.[99] It is to be noted that shoulder blades of camels and sheep were used for writing in Iran.[100]

The bones, when inscribed, were usually gathered and put in a jar or box, a practice which continued in the Islamic period. Al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī said that 'we used to write on bones, put them in a jar until it was full, then we took it away'.[101] Bone tablets (*alwāḥ ʿaẓm*) for writing are also attested.[102]

[92] J. Ryckmans and I. Vandevivere, 'Some Technical Aspects of the Inscribed South Arabian Bronze Inscriptions Cast in Relief', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 8 (1978), 53–65.

[93] al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* VIII, 220.

[94] Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī, *Kitāb Nashwat al-ṭarab fī ta'rīkh jāhiliyyat al-ʿarab*, ed. Naṣrat ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, 2 vols (Amman 1982), I, 105.

[95] W. Phillips, *Qataban and Sheba: Exploring Ancient Kingdoms on the Biblical Spice Route of Arabia* (London 1955), 114 and the picture opposite, 116.

[96] A. R. al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau: A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh 1982), 87–91.

[97] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 21; al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 207.

[98] al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk* III, 193.

[99] al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau*, 99.

[100] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 486.

[101] al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 86.

[102] Ibid., 86.

Arabic through Aramaic, as has been noted by Classical Arabic authors. For instance, al-Suyūṭī writes that *qiṭṭ* is a Nabataean word, and modern scholars like Fraenkel and Jeffery agree with him.[175] The word means 'parchment, document' in Akkadian and Aramaic, and in Arabic it must have the same meaning. Usually it denotes a 'legal instrument, deed'.

Lawḥ

The word *lawḥ* means 'board, plank, tablet'. In general it refers to any kind of tablet on which one would write. The Arabic word *lawḥ* is of Aramaic origin.[176] It is attested several times in the Qur'ān,[177] and the Qur'ān itself is said to have been written on tablets (*alwāḥ*).[178] Moreover, it occurs in the *ḥadīth*[179] and in pre-Islamic poetry. These tablets were usually made of wood, bronze, stone or bone. They were employed for writing different subjects, for example, votive inscriptions. The South Arabian term *ṭf* '(votive) tablet, plaque',[180] which is related to Akkadian *ṭuppu*, 'tablet', should also be noted.

Arabic sources provide no information as to whether the wooden tablets were coated with stucco or not. However, such tablets were used in Egypt[181] and wooden tablets coated with wax were used all over the ancient Near East,[182] especially in the New Assyrian period and later in the Classical world. Diptycha or polydiptycha were made from wooden tablets.[183] In Arabia wax wooden tablets are attested in the sources. No wooden tablets have survived in North Arabia, but some small ones have been found in the Yemen.[184] Stone tablets have been discovered all over Arabia, and bronze tablets in several places, e.g. at ʿAmrān (see above).

[175] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 241; al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 255; al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, article *qṭṭ*; al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 70–71; ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh ʿarab qabla al-Islām* VIII, 272.

[176] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 253; Lemaire, 'Vom Ostrakon zur Schriftrolle', 112–16.

[177] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 483–4.

[178] al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 205.

[179] Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* VI, 152.

[180] *Sabaic Dictionary*, 153.

[181] Schlott, *Schrift und Schreiber im Alten Ägypten*, 61.

[182] Galling, 'Tafel, Buch und Blatt', 211–17.

[183] Blanck, *Das Buch in der Antike*, 46–51.

[184] Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* I, 94–5.

sṭr means 'to write, write down, engrave', and the noun *sṭr* (pl. *'sṭr*), 'writing, inscription, document'.[165] The Arabic *saṭr* is apparently a loanword from South Arabian.[166]

Khṭṭ

This word occurs often in Thamudic inscriptions meaning 'to write, to draw', and some of these inscriptions are described as being signed (*khṭṭ*) by someone.[167] Apparently this word, which has the same meaning in Arabic, is genuinely of North Arabian origin.

Sifr

The Arabic *sifr*, 'book' seems to be an early borrowing from Aramaic,[168] as Classical Arabic authors have noted. It is well attested in Arabic sources, e.g. in the Qur'ān.[169] It is mostly used for religious books. Moreover, the word *safarah*, 'scribes' is found. *Sfr* with the meaning 'inscription' is attested in Safaitic inscriptions.[170]

Kitāb

The word *kitāb*, 'book, letter', is of Aramaic origin.[171] It is mentioned in Lihyanite inscriptions[172] and this root is also attested in the name of the North Arabian deity Alkutbay/Hanaktab. Apparently Alkutbay was the Arabian scribe deity, like Nabû in Mesopotamia.[173]

Qiṭṭ

This word occurs in the Qur'ān and in poetry. Apparently *qiṭṭ* (< *giṭṭ*) is of Akkadian origin (*giṭṭ* < KUŠ.GÍD.DA).[174] It came into

165 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 129.

166 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 109.

167 G. L. Harding, *Some Thamudic Inscriptions from the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan* (Leiden 1952), 52.

168 Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, 247.

169 Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 170–71.

170 E. Littmann, *Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden 1943), 333.

171 Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 248.

172 W. Caskel, *Lihyan und Lihyanisch* (Cologne 1954), 138.

173 F. Zayadine, 'The God(ess) Aktab/Kutbay and his (her) Iconography', in *Petra and the Caravan Cities: Proceedings the Symposium Organised at Petra in September 1985 by the Department of Antiquites of Jordan and the Iconographic Lexicon of Classical Mythology (LIMC)*, ed. F. Zayadine (Amman 1990), 37–44.

174 S. A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago 1974), 52.

Aramaic or South Arabian that the majority of these words came into Arabic, and the South Arabian words continued to be used in Arabic. Greek or Persian loanwords in Arabic came chiefly through Aramaic. The following is a description of some terms for written materials:

Musnad

The word *musnad* is used to describe South Arabian script and inscriptions. This usage is found already in Classical Arabic authors. The South Arabic term *mśnd* is employed for an inscribed bronze plaque and as a general word for an inscription on bronze or stone.[158]

Zabūr

This word, mentioned several times in the Qur'ān and other sources, means 'book'.[159] Arabic sources record this word as being of Yemeni origin.[160] It means a 'written document', on soft material like *'asīb* or leather. Ibn Durayd writes that the people of Yemen called every book *zabr*, and also notes the form *zibr*.[161] This word with such a meaning is still unattested in the epigraphical materials written on hard materials, but the verb *zbr* is found in the texts written on wooden sticks.

Sṭr

The word *saṭr*, 'book', is mentioned in the Qur'ān, in the *ḥadīth*[162] and in poetry. The root *sṭr*, which is thought to be of Aramaic or South Arabian origin,[163] seems to be a common Semitic root. It is attested in South Arabian inscriptions.[164] In South Arabian the verb

158 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 138.

159 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 103.

160 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 103; Ghūl, *Early Southern Arabian Languages and Classical Arabic Sources*, 207.

161 Ibn Durayd, *Jamharat al-lughah*, I, 254.

162 Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* II, 461.

163 Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 170.

164 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 129; S. D. Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptional Qatabanian* (Studi Pohl 14, Rome 1989), 159–60; G. Garbini, *Iscrizioni sudarabiche* I: *Iscrizioni minee*, (Naples 1974). The word *sṭr* in Minaean inscriptions occurs only in pl. form *'sṭr*, cf. the following examples, nos. 102, 9; 163, 3; 193, 3; 197, 6; 316, 2; 317, 3; 351, 9.

Ḥanbaṣī used to read them.[148] In the newly discovered wood-sticks there are also no words for scribe, but the word *zbr* 'written by' and a personal name are found.[149]

Nabataean inscriptions were engraved by stonemasons (*psl'*).[150] These can be compared with North-West Semitic inscriptions. Some give an indication of cursive script, which means that the text was first written on leather or papyrus and then engraved on stones.[151]

One may inquire whether the written materials were preserved in libraries or archives. Libraries and archives have been found from all over the ancient Near East.[152] Al-Hamdānī informs us that books or written materials were stored in treasuries of the Ḥimyarite (*khazā'in ḥimyar*).[153] Ibn al-Nadīm mentions that books or translations in Ḥimyarite were stored in the library of the caliph al-Ma'mūn.[154] We have no solid information about schools in pre-Islamic Arabia; however, temples and courts of kings in South Arabia must have been centres for teaching and learning the language and script. Arabic sources record such places in North Arabia, e.g. in Mecca, al-Ṭā'if, Yathrib and al-Ḥīra.[155]

It should be noted that the attestation of *zabūr* in connection with stone, in the sense of writing engraved on stone (*al-naqsh fī l-ḥajar*),[156] probably represents later Arabic usage, in which the verb *zabara* simply meant 'to write'.

III Terms for Written Materials

There are many words for writing and written materials recorded in Arabic sources in reference to pre-Islamic Arabia.[157] It was through

[148] al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* I, 11–13.

[149] Ryckmans, 'Inscribed Old South Arabian Sticks and Palm-leaf Stalks', 130.

[150] Ch.-F. Jean, J. Hoftijzer, *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest* (Leiden 1965), 231; J. F. Healey, *The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih* (Oxford 1993), 264.

[151] Van der Kooij, *Early North-West Semitic Script Traditions*, 114–25, 126–226.

[152] Cf. K. R. Veenhof, ed., *Cuneiform, Archives and Libraries: Papers Read at the 30e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Leiden, 4–8 July 1983* (Istanbul 1986).

[153] Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* X, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Cairo 1948), 111.

[154] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 5.

[155] Scribes of the pre-Islamic period are mentioned in the sources: see Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* (Beirut, n.d.), 475; 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-'arab qabla al-Islām* VII, 291–7.

[156] Ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* XIII, 4.

[157] Some of these words are collected by 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-'arab qabla al-Islām* VIII, 275–87.

and not for engraving on palm-leaf stalks. These styli could be the same as the *mizbar*, which is attested in the Arabic sources in association with ink. Apparently, the sharp instrument which was used for engraving the newly discovered wood-sticks was also called a *mizbar*. Two other styli have been found with ivory and wooden styli, one made of iron and the other of bronze.[141]

Arabic sources inform us that Arabs sometimes erased texts and wrote others over them. This was done in the case of leather or papyrus. The newly written document was called *ṭirs*.[142]

It is difficult to say whether a scribe or a stonemason wrote the monumental inscriptions. It may be assumed that the texts were first prepared by a scribe on soft materials like leather and then engraved or incised by a stonemason with a chisel. There is an indication of this from South Arabian inscriptions. The king of Qatabān ordered an edict to be written on wood and stone. This inscription is found written on stone.[143] It is possible that monumental inscriptions were engraved by a Sabaean stonemason (*grbyn*).[144]

It is to be noted that Arabic sources, especially pre-Islamic poetry, mention the Ḥimyarite scribe (*al-kātib al-ḥimyarī*). For instance, the poet Abū Thu'ayb al-Huthalī describes the Ḥimyarite scribe in one of his poems. This Ḥimyarite scribe used to write with ink (the verbs used here are *dhabara/zabara* and *ḥabbara*).[145] The poet Labīd describes a skilful writer of the *zabūr*-script as a young Yemeni (*walīd yamānī*).[146] A Yemeni as a writer is also recorded in the following verse in the *mu'allaqah* of Imru' al-Qays:[147]

> *Li-man ṭalalun abṣartuhū fa-shajānī ka-khaṭṭi zabūrin fī 'asībi yamānī*
> For whom are these traces which I have seen, (they) distressed me,
> like *zabūr*-script (written) on a palm-leaf stalk of a Yemeni.

Al-Hamdānī mentions people who knew how to read and write the *musnad*-inscriptions and *zabūr*-books, and tell the difference between *musnad*- and *zabūr*-script. He records that Abū Naṣr al-

141 Ryckmans, Müller and Abdallah, *Textes du Yémen*, plate 5a.

142 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, art. *ṭrs*.

143 *RES*, no. 3566, 21.

144 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 50.

145 Ibn Durayd, *Kitāb al-Ishtiqāq*, 48; Lewin, *A Vocabulary of the Huḏailian Poems*, 139, 367.

146 'Abbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 138.

147 *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays*, 170; For another explanation of this verse, see note 117 and the discussion by S. Noja, 'Une petite retouche à une traduction courante d'Imr al-Qais', *RSO* 62 (1988), 1–5.

formation about this. The word *qalam* is mentioned in connection with *adīm*. It must be said that these two kinds of leathers (*adīm* and *qaḍīm*) were a local product and specially developed for writing the *zabūr*-script.

Palm leaves or bark are special writing materials which until today have only been found in Arabia, not in other parts of the ancient Near East. However, palm leaves were used for writing in India, as mentioned above.[134] Whether we should see here Indian influence, or an independent local development is difficult to decide.

Stamp seals have been found in the Yemen.[135] These seals were used for stamping documents of parchment or papyrus, a practice well known in the ancient Near East. Arabic sources mention the word *marqūm*, 'stamped', which is probably a Yemeni word. *Kitāb marqūm* means a 'stamped book'.[136] The decipherment of this cursive or minuscule script went through several stages: the first steps were made by Maḥmūd al-Ghūl[137] and were continued by other scholars.[138]

We do not know exactly which word means 'scribe' in the South Arabian inscriptions. However, it must be a derivation from South Arabian roots meaning 'to write', such as *ṣḥf* or *zbr*. Proper names like *sṭrn* and *zbrn* which could be related to these roots, are to be noted. South Arabian inscriptions have not provided us with information about the role of the scribe in society. Who wrote them? Were they royal scribes or priests? The texts written in *zabūr*-script were executed by scribes with a pen (*qalam*, *yarāʿ* or *mizbar*). The word *mizbar* is mentioned in a *ḥadīth*[139] and also from the time of the first caliph Abū Bakr.[140] The ivory styli discovered in connection with the wooden inscribed sticks are good examples of instruments used for writing on materials such as leather, parchment or papyri,

[134] D. Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind*, 2 vols (London 1968), I, 264; II, 297.

[135] Cf. for example, *RES*, nos. 2688, 2696, 3313–24.

[136] M. 'A. Ghūl, *Early Southern Arabian Languages and Classical Arabic Sources: A Critical Examination of Literary and Lexicographical Sources by Comparison with the Inscriptions*, ed. O. al-Ghul (Irbid 1993), 320.

[137] A. F. L. Beeston, 'Mahmoud 'Ali Ghul and the Sabaean Cursive Script', in *Arabian Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Ghul: Symposium at Yarmouk University, Dec. 8–11 1984*, ed. M. Ibrahim (Wiesbaden 1989), 15–19. J. Ryckmans, 'Pétioles de palmes et bâtonnets inscrits: un nouveau type de documents du Yémen antique' in J. Ryckmans et al., *Textes du Yémen Antique*, 25–34.

[138] Ryckmans, 'Inscribed Old South Arabian Sticks and Palm-leaf Stalks', 127–40.

[139] al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *zbr*.

[140] al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* II, 444; Jārallāh Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Fāʾiq fī gharīb al-ḥadīth*, 4 vols, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī and Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo 1971²), II, 103.

Pottery

Potsherds (ostraca) were commonly used in Syria–Palestine and in Egypt, mainly for writing short notes or letters or brief messages. Ostraca were found in several places in the Yemen, in Taymā', in Qaryat al-Faw and in other places.[103] It seems that ostraca were not common in Arabia.

Stones

Most South Arabian and early North Arabian inscriptions (e.g. Thamudic, Lihyanite and Safaitic) are written on stone. The same can be said for the Nabataean inscriptions, thousands of which were found carved on rock or incised in roughly dressed stones.

Engraved inscriptions on well-dressed stones, such as on walls of cities or temples have been found in South Arabia. Many inscriptions were written on stelae, altars, blocks, slabs of stone, statues and statuettes. The most commonly used stones are limestone and sandstone, but inscriptions on marble or alabaster have also been found. Some small inscribed objects, such as seals, were made from dolerite or diorite. Some of the written stone tablets were coated with a red colour.

Inscriptions painted in red or black colours on plastered walls were found at Qaryat al-Faw[104] and painted writings on stones and on walls have also been discovered in caves in Oman. The painting is mostly in black or red.[105] This kind of writing is well known in Egypt. The Aramaic texts from DeirʿAllā,[106] which are written on plastered walls with different colours, are a good example of this type of inscription.

The Arabs also wrote on thin stone slabs. Arabic sources state that the Qur'ān was written at the time of the Prophet on thin stone slabs called *likhāf* (sg. *lakhfah*), 'thin white stone slabs, or flat, white splinters of (lime)stone'.[107] Writing on stones is called *al-*

[103] More than 50 Sabaean ostraca have been found in the excavations of the German Archaeological Institute (1997, 1998) at the Awām Cemetery near Marib. These ostraca will be published by the author. See also Livingstone et al., 'Taimā': Recent Soundings and new Inscribed Material', *Atlal* 7, 1983, 102–116; al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau*, 65.

[104] al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau*, 131, 133, 137.

[105] A. A. M. al-Shaḥri, 'Recent Epigraphic Discoveries in Dhofar', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 21 (1991), 173–91.

[106] J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Inscriptions from Deir 'Alla* (Leiden 1976), 23–8; Lemaire, 'Writing and Writing Materials', 999–1008.

[107] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 21; al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 203, 207; M. Ullmann, *Wörterbuch der Klassischen Arabischen Sprache* II, Teil 1, 430.

waḥy by the pre-Islamic poets,[108] a term also used for other kinds of writing.

A type of stone called *salimah* (pl. *silām*), which is said in Arabic sources to be of Yemeni origin,[109] is mentioned in pre-Islamic poetry as a writing material.[110]

II Writing Materials and Script

In the third millennium BC there were two writing systems in the Near East: cuneiform in Mesopotamia and hieroglyphic in Egypt. Cuneiform was mostly written on clay tablets. In Egypt papyrus was the most common material for writing, but other materials, such as parchment, stone and wood were also used.

In the first half of the second millennium BC the Canaanites developed their alphabetical writing system and leather and papyrus, rather than clay tablets, were suitable materials for writing the alphabetical texts. In the first millennium papyrus, parchment and leather are associated with the North-West Semitic scripts. Excavations and literary sources both confirm the use of these materials for the Aramaic, Phoenician and Hebrew texts, which were specially developed for these alphabets.[111] The population of Arabia took their writing system from the Caananites sometime during the second half of the second millennium BC. The South Arabian system is an offshoot of the Proto-Canaanite. It must be stressed that writing materials had a great influence on the style of writing itself. Writing on hard materials produces a kind of formal or lapidary script, whereas writing on soft material like papyrus or parchment produces a cursive script.[112] This can be seen in the North-West Semitic script and later in the development of the Arabic script. It is well known that the Arabic script developed from the Nabataean;[113] it must be noted that the Nabataean script itself developed from a cursive offshoot of Imperial Aramaic. In South Arabia two forms of script can be distinguished:

108 al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 317; ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-ʿarab qabla al-Islām*, VIII, 265.

109 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 113.

110 This is mentioned by Labīd in his *Muʿallaqah*, cf. al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 87.

111 Lemaire, 'Writing and Writing Materials', 999–1008.

112 On the technique of writing North-West Semitic scripts with ink, see van der Kooij, *Early North-West Semitic Script Traditions*, 90–94, 114–25, 217–20.

113 J. F. Healey, 'The Nabataean Contribution to the Development of Arabic Script', *Aram* 2 (1990), 93–8.

(a) *Musnad*-script was used for monumental and official inscriptions in South Arabia. It is the name of the script of the ancient civilization of the Yemen given by early Arabic authors in the Islamic period. The term Ḥimyarite is also used.[114] This script and its development are known to a certain extent. It is formal or monumental in style and is written on hard material, mostly on stone and bronze.

(b) *Zabūr*-script is a cursive developed from *musnad*-script.[115] Until the discovery of the wood-sticks this script was unknown — although the term '*zabūr*-script' (*khaṭṭ al-zabūr*) occurs several times in the sources, particularly in pre-Islamic poetry,[116] it was not recognized until this discovery. W. W. Müller and Yūsuf ʿAbdallāh were the first to give attention to the identity of this script and the association of the *zabūr*-script with the palm-leaf stalk *ʿasīb*.[117]

It must be stressed that the Classical Arab authors knew the identity of the *zabūr*-script. For instance, al-Sukkarī interpreted the word *dhabr*, a cognate of *zabr* as follows: '*al-dhabr* means a book in Ḥimyarite, written on *ʿasīb*'.[118] According to Ibn Durayd and others, in the dialect of the tribe Hudhail *al-dhabr* means 'writing' and *al-zabr* 'reading'.[119] Ibn Durayd also quotes poetic references to the effect that Ḥimyarite books (*zubur Ḥimyar*), which contain their history, were written in Ḥimyarite on *ʿasīb*, and he gives the commentary that they used to write on *ʿasīb*.[120] Moreover, *zabūr*-script (inscriptions, books) is mentioned alongside the *musnad*-script, which means that a distinction had been made between them.[121] Al-Hamdānī mentions *zubur Ḥimyar al-qadīmah wa-masānidi-hā al-*

[114] A. F. L. Beeston, 'Musnad', in *EI*², VII (Leiden 1993), 704–5.

[115] J. Ryckmans, 'Inscribed Old South Arabian Sticks and Palm-leaf Stalks: An Introduction and a Palaeographical Approach', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 23 (1993), 127–40.

[116] *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays*, 170, 173.

[117] W. W. Müller, 'L'écriture *zabūr* du Yémen pré-islamique dans la tradition arabe', and Y. M. Abdallah, 'Khaṭṭ al-zabūr al-yamānī wal-nuqūsh al-khashabiyyah', in J. Ryckmans, W. W. Müller and Y. M. Abdallah, *Textes du Yémen antique inscrits sur bois* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994), 35–9 (French section), 5–15 (Arabic section).

[118] Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sukkarī, *Kitāb sharḥ ashʿār al-hudhaliyyīn*, 3 vols, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Cairo 1965), I, 256, cf. also 98.

[119] Ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* XIII, 4–5; H. al-Ṭaʿʿān, *al-Adab al-jāhilī bayna lahajāt al-qabā'il wal-lughah al-muwaḥḥadah*, (Baghdad 1978), 179.

[120] Ibn Durayd, *Jamharat al-lughah*, I, 254.

[121] al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk* II, 117; Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī al-Baghdādī, *Bulūgh al-arab fī maʿrifat aḥwāl al-ʿarab*, 3 vols (Beirut, n.d.), III, 368.

dahriyyah, 'ancient books of Ḥimyar and their eternal inscriptions'.[122]

We have some information about the scripts of pre-Islamic Arabia from pre-Islamic poetry, mostly from the so-called 'traces-introduction' (*al-muqaddimah al-ṭalaliyyah*), in which the poets describe the remains or ruins of dwellings and the traces of an abandoned encampment of the lover, comparing it to script. The traces (*aṭlāl*) of the encampment of the lover are said to be like the traces of script on *'asīb* or *raqq*.[123]

The association of the *zabūr*-script with the palm-leaf stalk *'asīb* is mentioned by pre-Islamic poets like Imru' al-Qays,[124] Labīd,[125] al-A'shā[126] and, from the Umayyad period, al-Marrār b. Munqidh[127] and others. *Zabūr*-script is also attested in connection with palm-leaves (*jarīd*) by al-Hamdānī.[128] Apparently, *zabūr* was the script used for writing on palm leaves, palm trunks and palm bark. The ben-tree is also mentioned in connection with the *zabūr*-script, by Labīd.[129] *Zabūr*-script is thought to be the script employed for writing on parchment. The association of *zabūr*-script, inkwell (*dawāt*), papyrus (*qirṭās*)[130] and parchment (*raqq*, *qiṭṭ*) is found in pre-Islamic poetry.

Different kinds of leather, such as *adīm* and *qaḍīm*, were also used for *zabūr*-script. Ibn al-Nadīm mentioned a kind of script described as resembling women's script (*khaṭṭ al-nisā'*) written on *adīm*,[131] which could be a reference to *zabūr*-script. Words for ink (*ḥibr*, *midād*) are recorded in Arabic sources for the pre-Islamic period, and writing with ink is mentioned in pre-Islamic poetry.[132] The script called *al-waḥy* is said to be written not only on stone, as mentioned above, but also on white or new parchment,[133] which could be a reference to *zabūr* or a similar script. Poetry provides some in-

[122] Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* I, ed. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Akwa' al-Ḥiwālī (Cairo 1963), 13.

[123] N. H. al-Qaysī, *al-Ṭabī'ah fī al-shi'r al-jāhilī*, (Beirut 1984²), 257–76, especially 265–8; 'Abbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 299; al-Ālūsī, *Bulūgh al-arab* III, 367–8.

[124] *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays*, 170, 173.

[125] 'Abbās, *Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd*, 138.

[126] al-Shāyi', *Mu'jam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimā'iyyah*, 123.

[127] al-Ḍabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, 154, 16, 56.

[128] al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl* VIII, 221.

[129] Cf. note 44.

[130] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, art. *qrṭs*; the script is described there as *makhaṭṭ zabūr*.

[131] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 5.

[132] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, arts *ḥbr*, *dwy*; B. Lewin, *A Vocabulary of the Huḏailian Poems* (Göteborg 1978), 136.

[133] *Dīwān Ḥassān Ibn Thābit* I, 82, 15,1.

Ṣaḥīfah

Ṣaḥīfah (pl. *ṣuḥuf*) means 'document'. The Arabs understood it as any kind of sheet to write on. The term was common in pre-Islamic Arabia. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān, in *ḥadīth*, in poetry[185] and by different Arab authors.[186] Moreover, it is attested several times in South Arabian inscriptions, in Sabaic,[187] several times in Qatabanian[188] and mostly frequently in Minaean inscriptions.[189] The word *ṣaḥīfah* derives from the South Semitic root *ṣḥf*,[190] which means 'to write, write down, inscribe'. The word *ṣḥft* in South Arabian inscriptions usually means a document written on stone. *Ṣaḥīfah* was used for writing important subjects like religious themes, contracts, and so on.[191] The root is also found in Akkadian (*ṣêpu*).[192] The Arabic word *maṣḥaf*, 'book, volume', which is found for the Qur'ān, was borrowed from Geʿez;[193] the word originally meant a 'volume of *ṣuḥuf*'. *Ṣuḥuf* means 'rolls', as was noted by Classical Arabic authors.[194] The Arabic word *ṣaḥīfah* is of South Arabian origin[195] and seems to refer to a document or a sheet, written on any kind of material, such as leather or stone. The Arabic sources define the *qaḍīm* as white leather or white *ṣaḥīfah* for writing. The pre-Islamic poet al-Aʿshā mentions silver documents (*ṣiḥāf al-fiḍḍah*).[196]

Riqāʿ

The Arabic lexicons explain *riqāʿ*, 'scraps', as paper (*qirṭās*).[197] However, they can also be pieces of leather or papyrus. Among the written materials upon which the Qur'ān was gathered, were *riqāʿ* made of parchment (*raqq*), leather (*jild*), papyrus or paper (*kāghid*).[198]

185 al-Shāyiʿ, *Muʿjam alfāẓ al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah*, 165; Lewin, *A Vocabulary of the Huḏailian Poems*, 233.

186 al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 66.

187 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 142.

188 Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptional Qatabanian*, 134–5.

189 Garbini, *Iscrizioni sudarabiche*, nos. 151, 1; 182, 2; 185, 1; 186, 1; 195, 2; 208, 2; 222, 2; 228, 2; 246, 2; 247, 1; 264, 2; 358, 6.

190 *Sabaic Dictionary*, 142.

191 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 128.

192 *AHw*, 1091.

193 Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez*, 552.

194 al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 205.

195 al-Selwi, *Jemenitische Wörter*, 128.

196 al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *ṣḥf*.

197 al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, art. *rqʿ*.

198 Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script*, 52; Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie*, 143; al-Suyūṭī, *Kitāb al-Itqān* I, 202, 207.

Majallah

This Arabic word is of Aramaic origin. It means scroll or written rolled material. *Majallah* could be made from papyri or leather. Papyrus rolls are found in Egypt, Syria–Palestine, and are attested also in Mesopotamia.[199] Scrolls were used in Egypt as early as the third millennium BC, and were used for writing Hieratic[200] or Aramaic literary texts, or religious texts like the Qumrān texts. Aramaic proverbs and the story of the wise Aḥiqār were found written on a roll of papyrus.[201] The word *majallah* was known in pre-Islamic Arabia, as the Arabic sources mention. These give its meaning as 'a document (*ṣaḥīfah*) for writing words of wisdom.' Thus *majallat Luqmān* is the name used by Arabic writers for the book containing the wisdom of Aḥiqār.[202]

[199] Galling, 'Tafel, Buch und Blatt', 221–2; Lemaire, 'Vom Ostrakon zur Schriftrolle', 119–23.

[200] Schlott, *Schrift und Schreiber im Alten Ägypten*, 70–76.

[201] Cf. note 199.

[202] Hebbo, *Die Fremdwörter in der arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam*, 331–2; al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-jāhilī*, 64.